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Destination-Based Brand Equity: The Impact of Destination Image on the destination stakeholders

Introduction

Destination image has been an important topic in tourism research. The appeal of a destination's image can contribute to a destination's competitiveness. A wide range of factors contribute to the strength of the destination image, also described as destination brand equity, and the value being created is not limited to consumers. Destination image is an intangible asset that is shared by a range of stakeholders including destination marketing organizations, tourism related businesses and other community stakeholders.

While a range of issues around destination image have been examined, there remains much to be explored. While there is growing recognition that stakeholder engagement is critical in the development of effective brands, there is a paucity of research on the value created for these stakeholders by the brand image. Nor is there research addressing the impact of destination image on destination stakeholder behaviour. It is anticipated that operators in destinations with an image that emphasizes nature, and the environment will be more likely to undertake environmentally sustainable activities. This study aims to understand how the stakeholder perceives the value of the destination image and impact of image considerations on stakeholders' actions in a destination.

Literature Review

Destination brands act as an expression of clear image and competitive advantage (Seaton and Bennett, 1996; Morgan and Pritchard, 2002) that connects the customer and the product (e.g. Hankinson, 2004). Aaker's (1991) conceptualization of destination brand framework emphasized creating the value proposition for the brand identity to establish a relationship between the brand and the customer. Most of the research studies addressed the brand concept predominantly from a demand-side perspective, embracing a consumer-perceived image approach (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Anholt, 2005). The researchers only recently acknowledged the importance of a supply-side managerial perspective on tourism destination branding and started addressing it (Cai, 2002; Hankinson, 2007; Blain et al., 2005; Balakrishnan, 2008; 2009).

The Value of Destination Image

Destination image can be considered as important asset for the destination. Building brand equity is the process of not only creating ownership for a particular brand but the value of that ownership (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2011). Consumer based brand equity, developed by Keller (2003), has brand image as a key variable within a multi-dimensional construct. Konecnik and Gartner (2007) incorporated four elements of brand equity for a destination (destination awareness, destination image, destination quality, and destination loyalty. Boo, Busser, and Baloglu (2009) went a step further and added the dimension of value. Brand research supports a positive relationship between brand image and value (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). Destination image also has been identified as a key component of destination loyalty (Hosany et al., 2006). However, researchers highlighted that

community stakeholders' informed participation should be part of every stage of the place brand development (Ashton, 2014). Ashton (2015) suggests that all stakeholders should contribute to the base level brand components. Bregoli (2013) advocates for coordination of marketing efforts and the importance of “internal communication and “socialization” processes within the destination.

The brand equity created by destination image provides an additional community-based capital. The concept of community capitals is becoming an established framework for assessing destination communities (Emery & Flora, 2006). The established framework identifies seven capitals – natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, built. These capitals include both tangible and intangible assets. Social capital, an intangible asset, has been examined as a critical factors in effective community governance (McGehee, Lee, O'Bannon, & Perdue, 2010; Soulard, Knollenberg, Boley, Perdue, & McGehee, 2018). The current research will explore whether destination brand equity should be incorporated into our models of community capitals.

Destination Stakeholders and Governance

The impact of destination image on destination governance is another area that requires greater examination. Blain et al. (2005) assert that effective destination branding provides visitors with quality assurance for an unprecedented experience, reduces their search cost and allows a destination to establish a unique selling proposition for creating a distinct identity. The success of a destination relies on the support of the tourism stakeholders (Timur & Getz, 2008) and the balance of stakeholder involvement in the creation of destination brand identity (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). Destination brands need to develop brand strategy that takes cognizance of its place to recognize the sense of the place (Ryan, 2002). From strategic perspective, sense of place sense of place deals with local habitudes and communal practices that color the tourism experience (Hillier and Rooksby 2002). Intrinsically, destination managers must not only access the brand perception of tourists but also other stakeholders (Campelo, Aitken, Thyne, & Gnoth, 2013; Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017) wherein the residents' role as the brand ambassadors can be promoted (Konečnik Ruzzier & Petek, 2012).

Destinations are complex systems with each member of the system acting independently. As such, they require different approaches to governance than businesses and similar organization. Destination management approaches a more holistic approach to oversee formal structures that form a nexus between government, civil society and private enterprises (Presenza et al., 2005; Fyall et al., 2009). This intersection has become a central hub for the development of destinations (Presenza and Cipollina, 2010; Kennell and Chaperon, 2013). Formal structures like DMOs are further expected to facilitate such interaction (Morgan, 2012) and capture the involvement of a diverse set of stakeholder groups (Vernon et al., 2005) with a common goal of destination development and enhancing tourist experience (Kjaer, 2004; Beritelli et al., 2007; Baggio et al., 2010). Traditionally, a top-down approach was used, which has been replaced by inputs from all stakeholders that are encouraged for cohesive development (Vernon et al., 2005). Moreover, the concept of governance implies less governmental control (Breda et al., 2006) and steers destinations' structures and processes using bottom up approach (Beritelli and Bieger, 2014). Destination image, and the shared value it creates in the destination system, is a useful tool to encourage pro-destination/prosocial behaviors.

Methodology

This study would follow a qualitative approach and use semi-structured, in-depth interviews to investigate destination-based brand equity. The researcher opted to choose secondary data obtained from existing sources created by academic researchers, tourism analyzers, and professional organizations (Bryman and Bell, 2005). This study provided an opportunity to capture the perceptions of the participants (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002) in the form of detailed information through personal interviews. Moreover, interviews of the active group members were undertaken to study the deeper meaning and transform experiences. A purposive selection of interviewees (Bryman, 2012) took place to interview key informants. The informants would be government officials, stakeholders from tour associations, events & festival organisers and tour operators. Qualitative content analysis would be followed to analyse the data collected (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Anticipated Results

This research will expand understanding of the value of destination image to destination systems. Destination branding, the deliberate process of modifying or developing destination brand image, is often framed in terms of benefits to DMO marketing. Again, little examination has been undertaken to explore the relationship between destination brands and products within the destination. More often, the destination value is defined by the visitor experience and the impact on internal stakeholders is minimal if brand image is defined in isolation. This study will contribute to an improved understanding of destination-based brand equity which will have implications for destination governance.

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